

Siberia

Its Peoples & Its Possibilities

By Julius M. Price

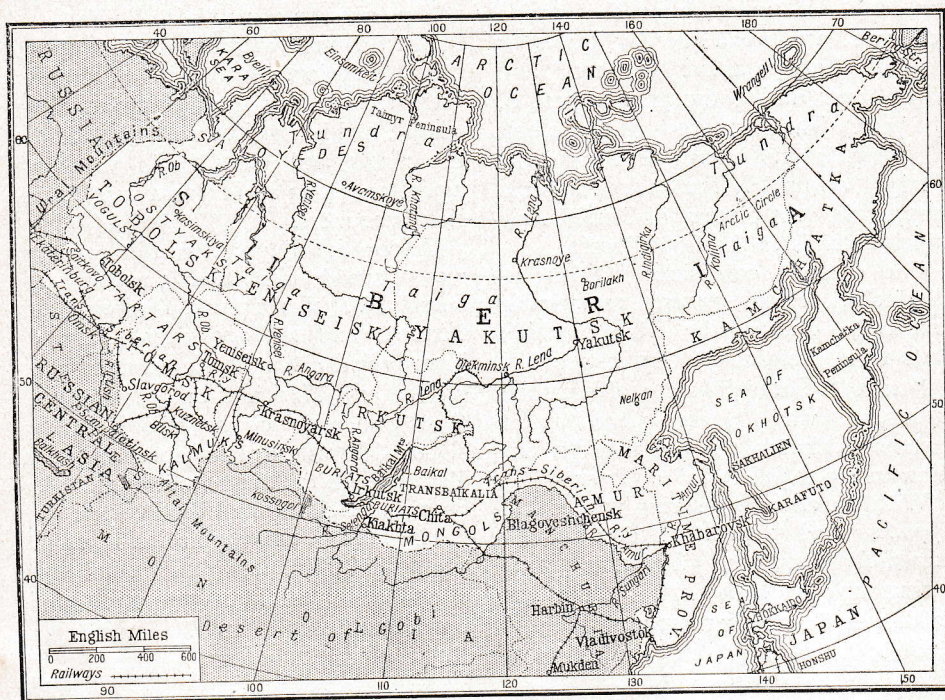
Author of "From the Arctic Ocean to the Yellow Sea"

NOTHING is known with certainty as to the origin of the name Siberia. Some authorities have conjectured that it is derived from the Russian word "Syever," signifying north ; others suggest that it was a designation of the chief settlements of the Tartar, Khan Kuchum, a sultan who reigned in the region of the Irtysh in the sixteenth century.

This immense territory now forms part of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, as the former Russian Empire is now known. Inhabited by exiles and descendants of exiles who were sent from Russia for political or criminal offences, and by native tribes of Mongolian origin, with a total population estimated

at about 11,000,000, it covers the whole of the northern part of the continent of Asia and is bordered on the north by the Arctic Ocean, on the east by the Bering Strait, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, on the south by the Chinese Empire, and on the west by European Russia, from which it is divided by the Ural Mountains.

The greater part of its 4,860,000 square miles is remarkable for rolling plains of desolate uniformity and the striking contrasts in physical conformation. Snowclad mountain ranges rising to almost Alpine altitudes, and of a grandeur unsurpassed in the world, are almost contiguous with wide expanses of monotonous, level table-land.



THE TERRITORY OF SIBERIA AND ITS PEOPLES



TWO OF THE SOYOT TRIBE INHABITING THE MONGOLIAN FRONTIER

The Soyots, an aboriginal people of Siberia, chiefly inhabit the Sayansk Mountains. They are peaceable and timid, keeping strictly to their own domains. Divided into two parties, the northern Soyots exist by hunting and trapping, professing Christianity but practising Shamanism; those in the south are more primitive and have no definite religion, though a few have become Buddhists.

In the north, extending for several hundred odd miles from the Arctic seaboard, are broad marshy tracts or tundras—barely above sea-level, and frozen over during the greater part of the year. These are succeeded by a belt of virgin forests known locally as the "taiga," or jungle. Farther south is the steppe, the vast plateau of Central Asia which extends to the Gobi Desert.

The climatic conditions of this inhospitable region present remarkable contrasts. During the winter, which lasts from October to April, frosts of 13° to 18° Fahrenheit are of common occurrence, while in some places, as for instance Yakutsk, the thermometer has been known to fall to 80° of frost.

With the advent of spring the ice disappears, and vegetation grows with incredible rapidity; flowering plants spring up as if by magic from the sodden earth, and corn sown in May is ripe for harvesting a couple of months later. Myriads of migratory birds, butterflies, and insects are to be seen

even in the extreme north, and the whole region takes on a new lease of life.

But this marvellous change is only of short duration. Early in September there are already signs of approaching winter, and in the first weeks of October the rivers and lakes begin to freeze again, and soon all is gloom and desolation once more.

Before the Revolution the territory was divided into four governments, namely, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Yeniseisk, and Irkutsk, and six provinces—Yakutsk, Transbaikalia, Amur, Kamchatka, Sakhalien, and Maritime or Primorskaya; the principal cities were Irkutsk, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Yeniseisk, Yakutsk, Chita, Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, Kiakhtha, and Vladivostok.

The bulk of the population is mainly composed of Russians, and was officially estimated in 1914 at 10,377,900; but it was not stated whether this included the scattered native races — Samoyedes, Ostyaks, Voguls, Mongols, Kalmuks, Buriats, and Tartars.

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In all the cities prior to 1915 there was a very high state of civilization, and municipal organization and systems of primary and elementary education were making big strides forward. The city of Tomsk had its university, which was rapidly becoming famous throughout Russia, and collegiate schools and colleges were being opened in every town of importance. Travellers have always been impressed with the diversity between the life in the villages and that in the big towns. This is explained to a great extent by the distances generally separating them, and the lack of railway

communication; but there is so distinct a line of demarcation between the peasantry and the middle and merchant classes that even the development of means of communication is scarcely likely to bring them together.

In the villages, which are all practically little Soviets in themselves, and are always contained in a ring fence, which effectually keeps not only the cattle but the inhabitants from straying outside the bounds of the little community, there is an isolation and drab monotony of existence that are probably without parallel in any other part of the



SETTLER'S HOME IN THE "LAND OF UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES"

Among the Slavs banished to Siberia, or transported as convicted criminals, were many reformers and malcontents, strong souls, continually at war with the prevailing state of affairs in European Russia. Other bold men emigrated of their own free will, their energy and enterprise finding for them in Far Siberia that freedom of speech and action denied to them in their native country

Photo, Underwood Press Service

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YAKUT ON THE TRAIL OF THE TUNGUS

Shrewd, enterprising people, the Yakuts of Eastern Siberia follow the Tunguses into their hunting grounds to trade guns and stores for furs. The Yakut's outfit commonly includes a whisk to fight the flies, that are a plague in Siberia

world ; whereas in the big towns is to be seen normally a social life comparable with that in any European city.

Society was represented by the families of the officials, the wealthy gold-mine owners, and merchants. Siberian hospitality was proverbial, and if a traveller came provided with letters of introduction, he was welcomed with open arms. In the "Sobranje," or club, which formed the principal institution in all Siberian towns, dances and concerts were constantly held.

Most of the people speak French or German, as is usual among the Russians, and excellent musicians abound—a fact due to so many of the inhabitants being descendants of political exiles of superior

class. But to see the real social life of Siberia one had to stay awhile in the capital of Eastern Siberia, Irkutsk.

Situated on the beautiful river Angara, and containing over forty thousand inhabitants, Irkutsk covers an enormous extent of ground, being two miles in each direction. It has many fine buildings and the general aspect, when I saw it, was almost European. The principal street, or "Bolshoi Oulitza," is over a mile in length, and there are several other equally noble thoroughfares.

It was quite a relief, after the desolate look of the streets at Krasnoyarsk and Yeniseisk, owing to the apparent absence of shops, to see here the handsome buildings with large plate-glass windows, in which were displayed every description of European goods. Irkutsk is not nearly so cold a

place as Krasnoyarsk, for, according to Keane, the mean winter temperature is only minus 4° Fahrenheit, and the summer temperature equal to that of Melbourne, and higher than that of Paris.

Life in the capital was but a replica of what one found all over Siberia in the big towns, though here, of course, it was on a larger and more luxurious scale, owing to the fact that Irkutsk was not only the centre of a large producing district, but was the home of some of the richest men in the country.

After the disastrous fire in Irkutsk in 1879, when almost the entire town was burnt to the ground, it was forbidden to build any but stone or brick houses in the principal streets so the result is

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broad thoroughfares, with lofty buildings of imposing architectural proportions on either side, which would not disgrace any Western capital.

For its size, there is probably no other city in the world which can boast of more public institutions than Irkutsk. On first driving through the city this was the characteristic feature which struck me, for everywhere, almost in every street, was some important public edifice, many of the institutions being the result of private munificence.

There are nineteen public schools, all under the supervision of a government educational committee; six hospitals—three town hospitals, a foundling hospital, a military hospital, and an asylum for the mentally deficient; at least four "homes" for children; three asylums for the aged and infirm; a monastery for men and a convent for women; a convict and a civil prison; a geographical institute; a large observatory with an English telescope; and two clubs—one military and the other for merchants.

Of the handsome churches, of which there are twenty-two, besides two cathedrals, many were also presented to this city by its millionaire inhabitants. The monastery of S. Innocent, a short distance from the city, is a beautiful specimen of Italian architecture, and cost its donors, several rich merchants, I do not

know how many million roubles. It is not only in Irkutsk, however, that one finds such proofs of great private munificence, for the magnificent cathedral of Krasnoyarsk was presented to that city by a rich man who had made millions out of vodka. In



REINDEER TUNGUS OF WILD SIBERIA

Brave and hardy hunters and fur traders are the Tunguses, roaming the vast forested areas of Siberia and the Amur basin. They use reindeer as riding and transport animals, and their artistic national dress shows distinct Japanese influence

Photo, Dr. Charles Hose



WOMAN OF STANDING BELONGING TO A BUDDHIST BURIAT TRIBE

The Buriats, one of the most numerous native races of Siberia, are cattle-breeding Buddhists, said to have migrated north in the early thirteenth century, when Jenghiz Khan ruled supreme in Mongolia, and are to be found chiefly in the province of Irkutsk and the Trans-Baikal territory. They are of Mongolian stock, possessing its features and characteristics in a marked degree

Photo, Dr. Charles Hose



KARAGASSE COUPLE IN THEIR WARM WINTER COSTUMES

The classification of the Siberian Tartars, of whom some 80,000 are of Turki and 40,000 of mixed Finnic stock, presents great difficulties, owing to the constant intermingling of races and customs. The Karagasses, of Turkish origin, and numbering now only a few hundred, live chiefly in the district north of Lake Baikal. Fish forms their staple diet, and several salted specimens are in this woman's arms



DINNER HOUR OF THE SOYOTS: MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY CIRCLE GATHERED ROUND THE OPEN HEARTH

The Soyots, or Soyons, who inhabit the Sayansk Mountains, are said to be of mixed Finnic and Turki stock; they speak a Turki dialect, and in recent years have come considerably under Russian and Mongolian influence. In Southern Siberia the "yurta" is a general name for a native dwelling. It is usually built of wood with a peaked roof, and is a slightly more civilized example of the cone-shaped tent of skin or felt still in use among some of the nomadic tribes. An open hearth occupies the centre of the floor, directly under the smoke-hole in the roof

Photo, Dr. Charles Hose

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pre-Bolshevist days police arrangements were particularly efficient. In the daytime mounted men were continually patrolling the streets to prevent any congestion of the traffic—a very necessary measure, considering the reckless manner in which Siberians drive; at night there was a curious and truly Eastern custom, watchmen parading the streets continually agitating a peculiar sort of knocker which emitted a sound not unlike that of the rattle London policemen used to be provided with.

The Siberians are born gamblers, and card-playing, drinking, and fast living have been the curses of the wealthy classes, whose fetish seems to have been "pleasure for pleasure's sake." "Vint," a card-game closely resembling bridge, was a veritable craze, and was played night and day for big stakes.

Vast Areas of Unknown Wealth

The enormous fortunes which one was continually hearing of in Siberia before the Revolution were chiefly amassed by private goldmine owners, and one frequently met men who had risen from poverty to fantastic opulence through lucky "finds" of the precious metal.

In connexion with the goldmining industry of Siberia, it is of interest to mention that in the old days all gold had to be sold immediately to the government, who bought it at current rate. A mine-owner was not permitted to sell to a private individual, nor even to have the smallest amount of the precious metal in his possession beyond a certain time. If he desired to keep a small nugget—say, as a curiosity—he had to buy it from the government, who would then give him a special permit, authorising its possession.

All gold had to be delivered at the owner's expense at the government smelting-houses, where it was made into nuggets and then sent to Petrograd—the cost of smelting and carriage being also charged to the owner.

Commercial enterprise in Siberia has always been out of proportion to the vast natural resources of the country. It has often been said that, were Siberia in Canadian or American territory, it would long ago have been one of the world's storehouses, for its potentialities are immense as a grain or cattle producing country, while its mineral wealth has been scarcely scratched as yet, and its vast forests could provide paper-making materials for generations. Meanwhile, it has been in a state of stagnation and somnolence, and, outside the big cities, principally used as a vast penal colony for political prisoners and convicts sent from Russia during the reigns of the Tsars.

Masterpiece of Railway Construction

The completion in 1905 of the great Trans-Siberian Railway, which extends from the Urals to the Pacific and is the main artery of the whole territory, was a notable achievement. It took no fewer than thirteen years to build. The length of the line with all its branches is 5,413 miles, and it is said to have cost eighty-seven and a half millions sterling. It was begun at several points, the first section to Cheliabinsk and Omsk from Zlatoust, with branches to Tomsk and Ekaterinburg, being completed in 1895, and the main line carried to Transbaikalia in 1901.

Inadequate Road and River Transport

The section round Lake Baikal, a mountainous district which presented enormous difficulties, was completed during the Russo-Japanese War, and in spite of much pessimistic contention at the time with regard to its efficacy, proved of invaluable service to the line of communication with the Russian army in Manchuria.

Apart, however, from its utilitarian and strategic aspect, it is certainly one of the most picturesque railway lines in the world, and if ever conditions become normal again it will be the quickest, cheapest, and most interesting

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of all routes to China and Japan—connecting as it does with Harbin, Mukden, Dalny, and Port Arthur on the Eastern Chinese Railway.

But, wonderful though it is, it is but a mere scratch across the vast territory, and only serves a very small portion of it. In most parts the tarantass (a four-wheeled, springless cart) in summer and a sleigh in winter are still the sole means of transport. Motor transport is in its infancy—mainly owing to the fact that most of the roads away from the main routes are but rough cart tracks.

But if conveyance by land is quite behind the times, that on the majestic rivers which intersect the vast region is still more so. Several of the longest rivers in the world intersect Siberia from east to west, from south to north—the Yenisei, 2,950 miles; the Obi,

2,700; the Lena, 2,600; the Angara, 1,100; and several important tributaries of from 600 to 250 miles each in length. The basin of the Yenisei alone is estimated to cover some 1,950,000 square miles.

All these rivers, although ice-bound for many months in the year, present immense possibilities for inland navigation during the summer months, yet no serious attempt has ever been made to exploit them. On some there are a few old wooden steamers and barges, but generally these magnificent waterways are deserted.

The same may be said of the immense sheets of fresh water. The principal of these, Baikal, is one of the largest fresh-water lakes in the world. It covers an area of 12,441 square miles, is 420 miles in length, and 90 miles

in breadth in its widest part. Lake Baikal is called by the Russians "the Holy Sea of Siberia," and has certain remarkable features, among others the marvellous transparency of its water, the rapidity with which it freezes when winter sets in, and its enormous depths—in fact, in some parts, where lines of 5,000 and 6,000 feet have been used, no bottom has been found, while in most places its average depth is 5,404 feet.

It is said in Irkutsk that it is only on Baikal that "a man learns first to pray from his heart," for so unexpectedly do awesome hurricanes arise that no one can tell, however promising may be the outlook when starting, under what conditions the opposite shore may be reached. Seals are caught in large numbers, and there has always been



CRABS FOR SALE ON A SIBERIAN STATION

A large proportion of the population of Siberia is descended from the early settlers—sturdy folk, capable of countering every hardship. The present generation, no whit less enterprising, follows many trades—including the sale of dainties along the railway

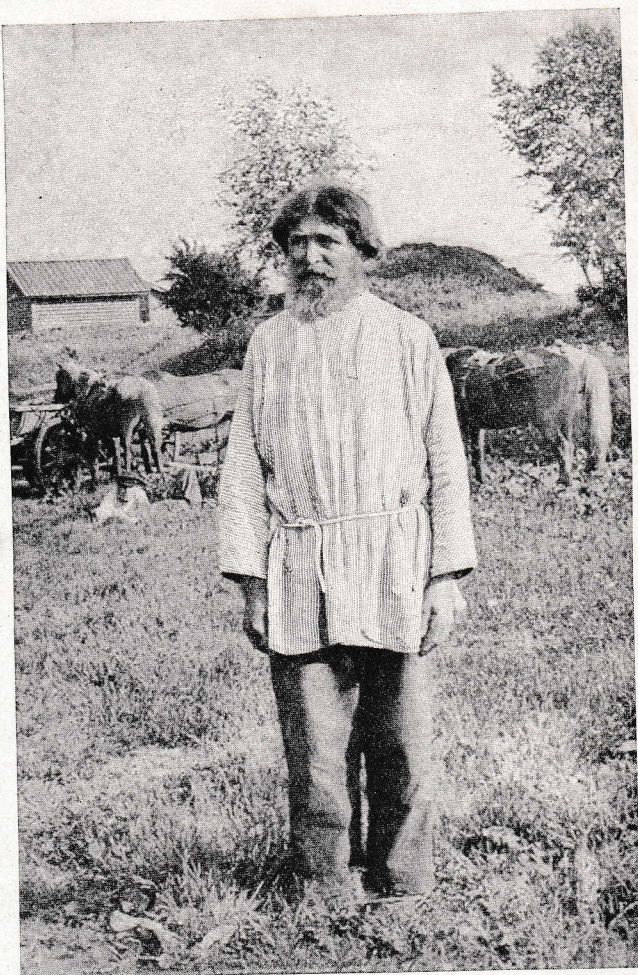
much conjecture as to how they come to be in the lake.

There is a small fleet of sailing ships plying on it, but these are mostly obsolete old tubs. Until the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway the Baikal was crossed in big ferry steamers during the summer months, and by sleigh on the ice in the winter. In the winter the roadway across was indicated by means of a double row of pine saplings stuck at intervals in the ice—a curious effect being thus produced as of a miniature boulevard stretching away into the distance. This method of crossing is still adopted in the winter in parts remote from the railway.

The mountains around the lake are a veritable storehouse of mineral wealth—even gold and precious stones have been found—but the “finds” have been undeveloped.

The various indigenous tribes scattered over the whole breadth of Siberia form communities in themselves which seldom intermingle, nor does one hear of marriages between the settlers and these tribesmen.

In the extreme north is a flourishing little settlement entirely inhabited by a portion of the secret sect called “Skoptsi” or White Doves, who were banished from Russia on account of their peculiar doctrines. There are few women in the sect, all the men are eunuchs, marriage being forbidden, and the form of their worship is dictated by their Elders. They are strict vegetarians and total abstainers.



PIONEER OF SIBERIAN COLONISATION

In peasant rubashka, or shirt, and with bare feet he represents that host of convicts exiled for religious and political opinions, who, after several years' detention, were liberated on condition that they adopted the settler's life within prescribed limits

Religion all over Siberia has always been practised with a very convincing fervour; indeed, it used to be said in Russia that nearly half of the year was given up to religious holidays. The truth of this is very patent in the towns and villages of Siberia, where a week seldom passes without a prasniki (or festival) of some sort occurring.

There is a great diversity of religion—all the Russians, of course, normally profess the Greek Orthodox faith, or some form of nonconformity in connexion with it; the Poles are Roman



PRIVILEGED PRIEST VERSED IN THE SORCERIES OF SHAMANISM

Shamanism, a form of spirit-worship, said to be one of the oldest religions in the world, is still practised by some aboriginal races of Siberia. This strange object, with bits of iron, small bells, rusty nails, copper coins, and other metal rubbish dangling about him, and holding a weird drum, is a Shaman priest in ceremonial garb, ready to conduct intercourse with the supernatural powers



MEMBERS OF AN EAST SIBERIAN TRIBE OUTSIDE THEIR LOG YURTA

In the northern districts near the mouth of the Amur dwell the Giliaks, a race of hunters, fishers, and trappers. Their villages are few and scattered, for this race is rapidly declining in numbers. The men and women are of diminutive stature, and dress very much alike, but feminine costume is sometimes distinguished by a fringe of metal disks suspended round the lower edge of the outer garment

Catholics, and there is a large community of Jews. Among the indigenous tribes the Tartars are Mahomedans, the Samoyedes, Ostyaks, and Voguls are Fetichists, and the Kalmuks are Buddhist Lamaïtes.

Whether the Bolsheviks will succeed in their avowed intention to uproot all this religious sentiment—which, in many

districts, takes almost the form of a superstition—is extremely doubtful.

So far, the advancement of Siberia has been retarded by the ignorance and apathy of its peasantry; until these conditions are changed by education and a consequent enlightenment of ideas, the vast territory will continue to remain a hundred years behind the times.



DWELLERS IN THE MORE FERTILE PORTIONS OF THE KASHGAR VALLEY
Excepting in the extreme west of Sin-Kiang, cultivation is almost entirely limited to the patches and narrow ribbons of oases that border the streams. But in the vicinity of Kashgar the natives have little trouble with the soil, which can be made to produce sufficient to meet all their requirements; and this prosperous-looking family, comprising three generations, has no lack of cereals or vegetables

Photo, Miss Ella Sykes